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THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT—VIII

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL H. H. SARGENT, U. S. ARMY

THE FIGHT FOR THE HINDENBURG LINE

After the St. Mihiel salient had been wiped out and there were no more German salients to attack, it was evident that the Allies would encounter much greater difficulties in forcing the Germans still farther back, particularly since Ludendorff had decided to make a determined stand along the old Hindenburg Line, which, during three years of war, had been developed into an intricate and powerful system of defenses, heretofore practically impregnable to Allied attacks. Indeed, save at the second battle of Cambrai, it had not been seriously breached throughout its entire length.

It was the middle of September, 1918, and there were only about six or eight weeks more of actual campaigning before the weather would put a stop to the fighting. It was the purpose of Ludendorff to hold the Allies substantially along the strongly intrenched positions of the Hindenburg Line until the coming of winter would permit him to rest, recuperate, and reconstruct his already shattered armies. If he could stop the onward rush of the Allied armies along this line and the armies of the Central Powers in other theatres of operations held their own, he could get his own armies again into shape for a renewal of the campaign in the spring of 1919, which he purposed doing, should the German peace offensive, which was already under way, not produce satisfactory results during the winter months.

On the other hand, Foch's purpose and hope was not to let these strongly fortified defenses stop the progress of his armies, but to break through them and continue his

victories. How to meet the difficult situation? where to strike? what plans, what strategy to adopt and carry out? were important and vital questions to be decided.

That portion of the line along which the contending powers struggled for the mastery in this great fight ran westward from a point about eight miles north of Verdun to a point about two miles north of Reims, thence north-westward through St. Quentin, Cambrai, and Lens to Nieuport on the English Channel. Southward from Verdun to Switzerland the French and Americans on one side and the Germans on the other stood inactively facing each other in their intrenchments during the great fight for the Hindenburg Line.

Tactically, on account of the Argonne Forest and its strong defenses, the most difficult portion of the whole line to break through was the Verdun-Reims sector; but strategically it offered greater advantages than any other. The reason was this: An attack pushed northward from this sector to Mezieres and Sedan would cut every east and west line of railway south of the Ardennes mountains, upon which the Germans were depending to a great extent for their supplies and munitions of war; and would leave remaining but one east and west line; namely, the Charleroi-Namur-Liege-Aix-la-Chapelle railway, which passes to the northward of the Ardennes and just south of the southeast extremity of Holland. Such an attack, if successful, could not but produce stupendous results; for with all the east and west lines cut, except the Charleroi-Namur-Liege-Aix-la-Chapelle railway, there would at once be a mighty effort on the part of the German army to retire along this line as far east as the Meuse River, before the Allies could push forward from Mezieres to Namur, sever this line of railway, and capture a good part of the German army.

However, it is evident that such a thrust as here outlined would be impossible of execution unless the Germans along other portions of the Hindenburg Line were kept occupied by Allied attacks; since, otherwise, German reserve divisions along the line could be withdrawn to the threatened flank in such numbers as to put a stop to the thrust.

On the other flank, too, there were strategical considerations of importance. It will be noticed that an Allied

thrust eastward through West Flanders towards Brussels would threaten not only the communications of the German troops along the Belgian coast and compel their retirement eastward towards Antwerp, but would threaten also the communications of the German troops occupying the Lille region; and, if pushed far enough, would likewise seriously threaten the Charleroi-Namur-Liege-Aix-la-Chapelle railway. Evidently, such a thrust, taken in conjunction with the thrust northward from the Verdun-Reims sector, would be the first step towards making of the German front an immense salient; and the farther these thrusts penetrated into German occupied territory, the greater the salient would become and the more vulnerable and dangerous it would be. But the two attacks on the flanks were not enough. It was necessary for Foch to attack also some intermediate sectors of the line in order to prevent Ludendorff from withdrawing his reserve divisions in great numbers from these sectors to the menaced flanks. But where was he to strike in order to do this and at the same time produce the greatest strategical results?

Examining the theatres of operations, we find that a thrust northeastward from the St. Quentin-Cambrai front to Maubeuge and Valenciennes, and thence eastward and northeastward towards Dinant, Charleroi, and Mons, would, taken in connection with the Flanders thrust, create a dangerous German salient in the Lille region; and, taken in connection with the Meuse-Argonne thrust, create a dangerous German salient in the Laon region. Moreover, such a thrust would sever the Metz-Sedan-Mezieres-Hirson-Maubeuge railway leading into the Lille district and make necessary the immediate retirement of the Germans from that salient; and it would also threaten the Aix-la-Chapelle-Liege-Namur-Charleroi railway upon which the German troops in Western Belgium were almost wholly dependent for their supplies and reinforcements; and should it reach Dinant, would cut in two the German armies and prevent any retirement of German troops northward from Mezieres and northeastward from Hirson to Namur.

Inasmuch as an allied thrust northward from the Verdun-Reims front towards Sedan and Mezieres would cut all the railway lines south of the Ardennes mountains; and a thrust eastward from the Flanders front towards Brus-

sels and northeastward from the St. Quentin-Cambrai front towards Charleroi and Mons, would threaten the single remaining east and west line to the north of these mountains; and inasmuch as the thrust from the St. Quentin-Cambrai front would also, if pushed eastward from Maubeuge to Dinant, cut the German armies in two, we can appreciate how extremely important, strategically, such a plan of operations would be. And we can appreciate also the importance to the strategical situation of the fact that the Ardennes Mountains form a barrier across a considerable part of the entrance from Germany into northern France and Belgium, and that this barrier has necessitated the building of the east and west railway lines on either side of them.

Of course, in breaking through the German lines from the Verdun-Reims, Flanders, and St. Quentin-Cambrai fronts, the Allies would create three salients more or less vulnerable to German attack; but since each would threaten seriously the communications of the Germans occupying Northern France and Belgium, Ludendorff's great concern would be, not to strike to destroy the Allied salients, but to fight to hold open the railways so that his armies could withdraw behind the Meuse before they were cut off and forced to surrender.

Here, again, that principle of strategy would apply, that when an army makes a thrust in such a direction as to cut or seriously threaten the communications of the other, that army whose communications are first cut or seriously threatened will invariably turn back to fight for them rather than strike at the communications of the adversary. Hence it followed that Marshal Foch need not have had and, seemingly, as the sequel will show, did not have, any great concern about the communications of his own troops occupying these salients. Accordingly, he was able to give almost his entire attention to the offensive operations against Ludendorff.

Then, again, there were other reasons, mainly on account of location, why the vulnerability of these three Allied salients would be slight. In the thrust towards Sedan from the Verdun-Reims front, the Americans would be protected on the east side of the salient by the Meuse River; and, on the west side, by the French, who were to advance on the left of the Americans. In the thrust from

the St. Quentin-Cambrai front towards Charleroi and Mons, the British would be protected on their right by the Sambre River and Canal. And, in the Flanders district, the push eastward must of necessity cause the evacuation by the Germans of the coast country; and this would give to the Flanders salient on the north side the protection of the English Channel.

Observant of all these things, Marshal Foch made his plans accordingly, and in the last week in September opened his campaign against the Hindenburg Line with these three great thrusts. Practically at the same time, or very soon afterwards, other attacks were also made from intermediate sectors, where there seemed to be favorable chances of success; but these three major thrusts were the ones that had the principal strategical bearing upon the conduct of the campaign.

An American army under General Pershing having been assembled as secretly as possible along the Meuse-Argonne sector between Verdun and Reims, quietly, on the night of September 25, took the place of the French who had held this portion of the line for a long period; and on the morning of September 26 began the attack, which, in the face of most desperate resistance, was to continue during the next six weeks and which forced back the Germans slowly but surely to the very gates of Sedan.

On the first day of the attack the Americans pushed through the first line of defenses, and on the two following days penetrated the German position to a depth of from three to seven miles, taking Haucourt, Malancourt, Varennes, Charpentry, Very, Montfaucon, Gercourt, and other villages. East of the Meuse an American division, which was with the Second Colonial French Corps, captured at the same time Marcheville and Rieville, thus giving further protection to the right flank of Pershing's army. At the same time the French, on the left of the Americans, west of the Argonne, also succeeded in pushing well to the front. In this attack by the Americans, as well as in practically all subsequent ones against the Hindenburg Line by the French, British, and Belgians, the tanks played an important and often a determining part.

The attack had taken Ludendorff by surprise; but seeing at once his peril, he immediately ordered a number of reserve divisions to the threatened front; and, collecting

such troops as were immediately at hand, began a series of counter attacks, supported by heavy artillery fire containing many gas shells. By these means the Americans and French, after a few days' fighting, were temporarily checked; nevertheless, they continued to exercise such strong pressure on the Germans, pushing forward here and there in the face of most determined and desperate resistance, that Ludendorff was compelled to continue ordering more and more divisions from other parts of his line to this menaced flank.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the line the Belgians and British from Dixmude southward to the Lys River had taken the offensive and, driving eastward, had swept the Germans across the Paschendaele Ridge into the Flanders plain below. This thrust, reaching in its first push almost to Roulers and Menin, made it necessary for the Germans to retire eastward forthwith from the Belgian coast and seriously threatened their communications in the Lille region to the southward.

Seeing, as before, the great peril to his troops, should this thrust of the Belgians and British not be stopped, Ludendorff at once hurried reserves to this front also from other parts of his line and, finally, succeeded in checking it temporarily, just as he had checked the great American Meuse-Argonne thrust.

But scarcely had these thrusts got well under way when Foch launched the attack from the Cambrai-St. Quentin front. This attack was made by Byng's and Rawlinson's British armies, assisted by the Second American Corps, composed of the Twenty-seventh and Thirtieth divisions. The attack began on September 27 in the vicinity of Cambrai, and on the two following days extended southward to St. Quentin on a front of about twenty-five miles. The fighting about Le Catelet, midway between Cambrai and St. Quentin, was severe, but success finally crowned the efforts of the British along the whole line. St. Quentin and Cambrai were both captured and the Hindenburg Line completely broken through. Nor did the thrust stop there. On October 5 the British captured a large number of prisoners and advanced some four or five miles; and on October 8 they struck a decisive blow, which, in the next four days, carried them into the open country about Le Cateau, some fourteen miles east of the Hindenburg Line.

Every mile of this advance deepened and made more vulnerable the Lille and Laon salients. Maubeuge and Valenciennes now became the new objectives of the British along this front.

Meanwhile, along other sectors of the line the Allies had made much progress. South of St. Quentin, Debeney's French army had pushed forward on the right of the British. Mangin's army, assisted by an Italian division, had driven the Germans from the Chemin des Dames. The armies of Gouraud and Berthelot, assisted by the Second and Thirty-sixth American Divisions had advanced north of Reims. And the Americans had swept the Germans out of the Argonne Forest. In short, Foch had won the great fight for the Hindenburg Line.

This great fight, which was begun by the Americans and French on September 26, 1918, and which practically ended on or about October 5, 1918, when the British broke through the Cambrai-St. Quentin front, may be looked upon as one of the great steps in that greatest of all battles in the world's history, which began with Foch's counter offensive of July 18, 1918, and did not end until the armistice of November 11, 1918, and which has been appropriately named by General Mallerterre of the French army, The Battle of Liberation.

The fact that for more than four years the Germans had held the Hindenburg Line against repeated and determined efforts of the Allies to take it; and then within ten days in the fall of 1918 had lost it; leads one to inquire, how it was that Foch accomplished all this in so short a time? It was not that the Germans had shown any diminution in their fighting qualities; for they had never fought harder or more desperately. How then did he win such success? The answer is that he won it by his tank attacks; by the superior morale of his troops, which had been enormously increased by previous victories; by taking advantage of the strategy of the situation to attack the Germans in such directions as to threaten their communications; by continuing to maintain the offensive after he had assumed it in his great counter attack of July 18, 1918; and by hard blows and terrific fighting all along the line.

The tanks were an enormous help in breaking through the barb-wire entanglements and defenses of the Hindenburg Line, and in putting the machine guns out of action.

Indeed, they were of such immense help that it may with truth be said that without them the Hindenburg Line probably would never have been taken. This leads to the conjecture that if Germany had been as successful in developing this implement of war as were the Allies, the tanks on either side would to a great extent have neutralized each other; in which case the Germans most probably would have been able to hold the line, since, even with the help of the tanks, the Allies were able to break through only after the hardest fighting—fighting which involved enormous sacrifices of life.

There were in this war many surprising things relating to weapons of combat; but there was none, perhaps, more surprising than that the deciding factor in this great battle was the tank, an implement of destruction which no man had ever dreamed of prior to the war, and which was not developed until long after the war's beginning nor perfected until just a few months before its close.

The morale of the Allied soldiers at this stage of the campaign was at its highest. Their victories already won had aroused in them great enthusiasm. Obstacles, which a few weeks before might have seemed insurmountable, appeared, after these victories, insignificant to them. Their hopes had arisen; their blood had quickened; they had begun to feel that nothing could check them in their victories, nothing stop them in their progress.

Marshal Foch saw deeply into the strategy of the situation. Having ironed out all the German salients, he began operations against the Hindenburg Line with two powerful attacks on the flanks, which threatened at once the communications of the German armies occupying Northern France and Belgium; and he immediately followed these attacks with a great blow from the Cambrai-St. Quentin front, which threatened still further the German communications. The attack on the flanks made of the German line an immense salient and the attack between the flanks divided this immense salient into two salients. Where there were no salients, Foch attacked in such directions as to make them; where there was little vulnerability in the line, he attacked in such directions as to make it much more vulnerable. In each case he looked beyond the tactical victory into the strategy of the campaign. In each case he looked to the communications of the enemy. Every thrust

and nearly every attack from the beginning of his counter offensive against the Chateau Thierry salient to the driving of the Germans out of and beyond the Hindenburg Line were in such directions as to cut or threaten the communications of the enemy and produce important strategical results. Even when, as in the Argonne, the tactical difficulties were greater than along any other portion of the line, yet he chose this sector from which to make the great American thrust, knowing that a break through here would produce the greatest strategical results. Indeed, a break in the line here and an advance to Sedan and Mezieres would have necessitated the immediate withdrawal of the Germans from Northern France and Belgium, regardless of whether there were any successful attacks made along other portions of the Hindenburg Line. In fact, if when the Americans and French had reached Sedan and Mezieres, the Germans had still held the Hindenburg Line, from, say, midway between Reims and St. Quentin northward through St. Quentin, Cambrai, and Lens to Nieuport, their position, strategically, would have been much more dangerous than it was on the day of the armistice, when they were occupying a line approximately parallel to this, but some forty miles farther eastward. The reason for this is, that the Germans at the time of the armistice, being some forty miles nearer the line of the Meuse than they would have been along the Hindenburg Line from the vicinity of St. Quentin northward to the coast, were in a much more favorable position for withdrawing behind that river before their communications were severed. Or, to state the reason a little differently, the Americans and French at Sedan and Mezieres were much nearer Namur on the Charleroi-Namur-Liege-Aix-le-Chapelle railway than the Germans would have been along the Hindenburg Line northward from St. Quentin.

However, it should not be inferred from this reasoning that Foch's attacks along other portions of the Hindenburg Line than the Meuse-Argonne front were unnecessary. On the contrary, they were necessary and of the greatest importance, for without these attacks to hold the enemy in front, the Germans would have been able to mass such overwhelming forces in the Meuse-Argonne region as to prevent any Allied advance there, which would have put a stop to the carrying out of Foch's strategical plan.

From July 18, 1918, when Foch began his great counter-offensive, until the Armistice of November 11, the fighting on the Western front never ceased. It was one continuous battle composed of many smaller battles, in which Foch having got the offensive at the start continued to maintain it to the end. He was a thorough believer in offensive warfare. He knew that the *offensive alone promises decisive results*.

Ludendorff also believed in the offensive; but there was this difference between them. Ludendorff made long pauses between his thrusts, which gave the French time in each case to prepare for the next attack; and, finally, gave Foch time to prepare for his great counter offensive of July 18.

On the other hand, Foch, once having obtained the offensive, struck so rapidly and in such unexpected places that Ludendorff had no time to restore his shattered armies and prepare for offensive operations. In the rapidity with which Foch struck and in the persistency with which he continued to maintain the offensive, his operations were very similar to those of Bonaparte in his first Italian campaign.

Then, again, this striking in many places—this attacking all along the line—prevented Ludendorff from concentrating his reserves in great numbers upon menaced points, since the weakening of any portion of his line for that purpose might allow the Allies to break through along that front. This method of preventing the sending of reserves to threatened or menaced points was one which General Grant had employed with signal success in the great Civil War in America. Bearing in mind that the commander-in-chief of the Allied armies not only hammered away continuously on the Western front from July 18 until November 11, but was responsible in great measure for the active operations of the Allied armies in Palestine and, especially, in the Balkans during this period, there will be seen a great similarity between the strategy of Foch and that of our own great soldier, U. S. Grant. Indeed, the following extracts from General Grant's report of the operations during the time he was Commander-in-Chief of the United States armies in the Civil War might be used almost word for word to describe accurately Marshal Foch's strategy. Grant says:

From an early period in the rebellion I had been impressed with the idea that active and continuous operations of all the troops that could be brought into the field, regardless of season and weather, were necessary to a speedy termination of the war. . . . I therefore determined, first: to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the armed force of the enemy; preventing him from using the same force at different seasons against first one and then another of our armies, and the possibility of repose for refitting and producing necessary supplies for carrying on resistance. Second, to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country to the constitution and laws of the land.

In other respects, too, was Marshal Foch very much like General Grant. In campaign and battle both were distinguished for good judgment, clearness of vision, and coolness of head. Not to be anxious; not to change countenance; not to be perturbed by unfavorable events, nor to be puffed up by victory; to be always cool and collected; to avoid confusion in commands; to give orders in the midst of battle with perfect composure, these were some of the similar, distinguishing characteristics of these two great soldiers.

(To Be Continued.)